

UNRAVELLING THE ENIGMA OF *PSYCHIC SURGERY*

Filipino Christian Spiritist healers claim they perform their miraculous, fourth-dimensional operations through the intercession of Spirit Protectors under the direction of Jesus Christ.

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Of all the controversies that have emerged around the various forms of spiritual healing, none has reached the level of controversy surrounding "psychic surgery". In the 1958 book, *Into the Strange Unknown*, written by reporters Ron Ormond and Ormond McGill, are the first references to what would later be termed "psychic surgery". Ron Ormond used the term "fourth-dimensional operations" to describe the paranormal healing work of Eleuterio Terte, whom Ormond referred to as a "fourth-dimensional surgeon".

Ormond wrote: "A patient suffering from what had been diagnosed as a gallstone lay on the table, abdomen bared. Terte's thumb and forefinger of his right hand sank out of sight into the flesh. As his fingers disappeared within the man, the choir commenced their singing, stopping only when the healer's hands emerged with the gallstone, which he dropped into the waiting jar of alcohol." He went on to say: "In each operation, there was seemingly no pain, no bleeding, no open wound of any kind."

Overwhelmed by what they had seen, the reporters interviewed the patients, one of whom told them: "God had performed the miracle, using the man, Terte, as His instrument." Terte confirmed this observation, saying: "I can do nothing unless the power of the Spirit Protector is within me."

On their way back to Manila, the reporters discussed the amazing events they had witnessed. Ormond asked McGill: "What is your verdict?" McGill replied: "Either that man is working miracles, or he's the greatest magician that ever lived."

In conclusion, Ron Ormond summarised: "I, and McGill, still don't know what to think; but we have motion pictures to show it wasn't the work of any normal magician, and could very well be just what the Filipinos said it was: a miracle of God performed by a fourth-dimensional surgeon."

Lacking any understanding of the religious beliefs and spiritual practices of the "fourth-dimensional surgeons", well-meaning but misinformed parapsychologists attempted to define what they had witnessed. The very term "psychic surgery", coined by the writer Harold Sherman, suggested that the spiritual healing practices of the Filipinos, derived from their religious practices, were equivalent in some way to the surgical procedures of Western medicine.

This supposition aroused the ire of Western doctors and set into motion a concerted effort on the part of the Western medical profession to prove that "psychic surgery" was a fraudulent and deceitful form of medical quackery. On close examination, it became apparent that, in addition to the genuine miracles that had been thoroughly documented, some of the "psychic surgeons" were simulating the "operations" with a sophisticated and innovative form of sleight of hand.

In 1974, the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Senate Subcommittee on Health and Long Term Care held hearings on psychic surgery. In these hearings, the FTC heard the testimonies of 48 witnesses and reviewed 134 exhibits. According to these witnesses, the Filipino healers had defrauded their patients by palming small plastic bags which contained blood and tissue. The witnesses maintained that the Filipino healers were defrauding their patients by producing these plastic bags in sleight-of-hand simulations of surgery.

Working from the premise that Filipino healers were impersonating surgeons, thereby practising medicine illegally, police began setting up sting operations in order to prosecute them. In 1984, congressional hearings, chaired by Claude Pepper, reviewed the files of five governmental agencies: the FTC, American Cancer Society, National Institutes of

Health, Department of Health and Human Sciences, and the American Medical Society. This four-year review led to the conclusion that they "could find no evidence that psychic surgery was effective".

In 1986, the arrest and prosecution of psychic surgeons began in earnest. Gary and Terry Magno were arrested in Phoenix, Arizona, and charged with the fraudulent practice of medicine. They posted bail and immediately fled back to the Philippines. In 1987, Jose Bugarin was arrested in Sacramento, California, for cancer quackery and the illegal practice of medicine. He was sentenced to nine months in prison. In 1989, Placido Palitayan was arrested and prosecuted in Oregon for the illegal practice of medicine. In 1991, immigration officials arrested Terry Magno in the Philippines and deported her back to the United States to stand trial. Mrs Magno faced 17 counts of fraud and one of conspiracy in connection with the 1986 charges of practising psychic surgery in Arizona.

PLACEBO VS PARANORMAL SURGERY

While the persecution of the Filipino/Filipina healers was getting into gear, the Institute of Noetic Sciences published a report on aspects of the placebo effect that were known only to a select group of medical researchers. One of the topics covered in the report was the little-known subject of placebo surgery.

In the 1950s, several American doctors conducted experiments designed to determine the merits of the surgical procedure for angina pectoris. In one experiment, three of five patients received the operation. The other two were merely placed under anaesthesia and given a surface incision, which was then sutured. Once awakened, the five patients were monitored during their recovery from the operations. Overall, to the amazement of the physicians, a significant percentage of the patients who had received placebo operations was cured.

In 1961, Dr Henry Beecher reviewed two double-blind studies of placebo operations. These studies convincingly demonstrated that the actual operation produced no greater benefit than the placebo operation.

In a separate study, conducted by Dr Leonard Cobb and associates, placebo surgery proved to be more effective than the real thing. Cobb reported that 43 per cent of the patients who received placebo surgery reported both subjective and objective improvement. In the patients who had received the "real" operation, only 32 per cent reported satisfactory results. What this research established is that the mere form (metaphor) of surgical procedures can produce the same results as the actual surgical procedures.

When I first read this study, lights went off inside my head. Could the sleight-of-hand operations, the damning evidence in all of the criminal cases against the fourth-dimensional surgeons, actually be a sophisticated form of "placebo surgery"? Were the small bags of blood and tissue that had been used to seal the fates of healers accused of medical fraud, actually tools being used by the psychic surgeons to activate the mysterious placebo

mechanism—a belief-mediated healing process that produced a 43 per cent cure rate in American placebo surgery studies? If placebo surgery produced these results in the United States, was it not logical to expect the same results when performed by Filipinos?

All of the early research on psychic surgery was based on the assumption that the operations were 100 per cent paranormal phenomena. Paranormal phenomena were judged to be genuine only in cases where the phenomena could be subjected to rigid scientific scrutiny and proved to be replicable under clinical conditions. Though researchers from several different countries had succeeded in documenting a number of genuine psychic surgery operations in tightly controlled studies, the discovery that the Filipinos were using a form of placebo surgery breached the required standards of proof for scientists and parapsychologists alike.

To compound the confusion, it was becoming apparent to many researchers in the 1970s that placebo operations were somehow healing people. The researchers saw that patients who believed in the veracity of the operations responded positively, even miraculously, to the placebo operations. The discovery of sleight-of-hand psychic surgery in the Philippines took place almost 20 years before scientific research advanced enough to provide an explanation for the success of the healers who used the placebo operations.

Having insufficient knowledge of psychoneuroimmunology, parapsychologists concluded, along with debunkers, that the placebo surgery practised by the Filipinos was a form of medical fraud. The discovery of fraud, however, did not change the fact that dramatically paranormal operations that did not involve sleight of hand had been extensively documented in both the Philippines and Brazil.

In the increasingly polarised and hysterical debate over psychic surgery, the focus of research came down to two main issues. The first was whether the psychic surgeons were actually opening the bodies of their patients, or whether their operations were merely simulations of surgery. The second was whether or not the extracted tissues and blood produced during the operations

were consistent with the tissue and blood types of their patients.

A number of studies were conducted on these questions in virtually every country the psychic surgeons visited. For every test that confirmed the tissue and blood to be of human origin and that matched the blood and tissue of the patients, another found the samples to be of either animal or non-human origin. For the Germans, Australians, Americans and Japanese who tested these samples of blood and tissue, the results of these tests merely led to increased polarisation and offered no solution to the enigma of psychic surgery. The early studies conducted by people like Henry Belk, Stanley Krippner and Andrija Puharich established that genuine paranormal operations did in fact take place.

Faced with two very different types of operations, and lacking the understanding to provide a satisfactory explanation for the supposedly "fraudulent" operations, those who had witnessed the "genuine" operations were placed in a truly mind-boggling predicament. If they acknowledged that sleight of hand was being

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used to simulate quasi-surgical operations, they were forced to separate the imposters from the genuine healers.

Realising that sleight of hand was indeed widely used, and not wanting to be labelled as facilitators of quackery, the advocates of psychic surgery began to distance themselves from the healers. Serious researchers who had documented hundreds of genuine operations retreated to the position that while sleight-of-hand simulations of operations were a reality, genuine paranormal "operations" were *also* a reality. Eventually, the debates on psychic surgery ceased, as no one could reasonably explain the practice of placebo surgery.

CONTROVERSY IN THE PHILIPPINES

In 1983, I had the opportunity to visit the Philippines as a guest of the famous psychic surgeon Reverend Alex Orbito. I met Rev. Orbito through a close friend who had been healed by him. Later, my friend and I co-sponsored Rev. Orbito to come to Hawaii to conduct a healing mission.

During this healing mission, we strictly controlled the healing environment, eliminating any possibility of fraud. The results of the healing mission were so impressive that I was immediately convinced that Rev. Orbito was genuinely performing paranormal healing, and that psychic surgery was a fact. Two days before returning to the Philippines, Alex asked my friend and me if we would come to the Philippines and produce a video documentary of his life and work. We agreed to do so, and after a month of preparation we proceeded on to the Philippines.

I arrived in the Philippines in June of 1983 and immediately became aware of the controversy surrounding psychic surgery. It seemed that everyone I met had an opinion on the subject. While detractors of psychic surgery insisted that it be rejected entirely as medical quackery, advocates insisted that it be integrated into the conventional practice of medicine. Since my only experience of psychic surgery had been totally positive, I was genuinely surprised to find myself surrounded by so many zealous detractors.

The publicity surrounding psychic surgery had drawn a number of people from around the world who fancied themselves as freelance quack-busters. They saw themselves as public servants, boldly blowing the whistle on medical fraud. To these sceptics, psychic surgery was a brazen hoax with no redeeming value. As I came to know these people, the flaws in their thinking became apparent. The most obvious was their total dismissal of the many dramatic, often miraculous, cures that were taking place. While working at Alex's healing centre, I saw hundreds of people come from around the world with all sorts of ailments and leave cured. I began to wonder why the debunkers were choosing to ignore the obvious success of the psychic surgeons.

I was deeply impressed by the fact that, whatever psychic surgery was, it seemed to be equally effective, regardless of the diverse backgrounds of the patients who continually arrived from all over the world. While sceptics insisted that psychic surgery

was nothing more than a "despicable" fraud, delegations of patients continued to arrive from around the globe on a daily basis.

I could not imagine a better way to study the efficacy of a healing technique than to subject it to the objective and subjective scrutiny of every conceivable belief system as well as the various racial and religious biases of a broad cross-section of the entire human race. It also seemed reasonable to assume that any method of healing that could produce consistent results, given these conditions, certainly had merit. It was quite common to hear enthusiastic testimonies to the healing abilities of the psychic surgeons being offered in Japanese, English, Arabic, Chinese and many other languages.

Rev. Orbito told these delegations to surrender to God in whatever way they perceived God to exist. The message at Rev. Orbito's healing centre was that God is larger than any particular religious orientation.

Living in the Philippines and working at Alex Orbito's healing centre, I saw overwhelming evidence that psychic surgery was a very effective method of healing. Surrounded by so many satisfied and grateful patients, I was both baffled and even offended by those who continued to insist that the psychic surgeons must prove, under clinical conditions, that what they were doing was "real". I couldn't understand why the hundreds of people who were visibly and dramatically cured didn't constitute "proof". In this surreal environment, the definition of what constituted "real" psychic surgery became increasingly nebulous. To parapsychologists, psychic surgery was "real" if performed without using sleight of hand. To scientists, only conventional surgery was "real".

Sceptics demanded that the healers submit to controlled scientific studies. When healers refused to submit to such experiments, their refusal alone was regarded as proof that they were fakes and that psychic surgery was quackery. This bizarre situation forced Alex Orbito to announce publicly that "the mission of the healing is not to convince the people, but to cure the people". In fact, several psychic surgeons did agree to extensive scientific testing, and it didn't take them long to figure

out that being the guinea pigs of scientific materialists was insulting, absurd and counterproductive.

In increasing desperation, those who continued to emphasise the failures and disregard the successes of the healers were forced to try to save face by taking a stand on the issue. Those who had hoped that psychic surgery would conform to their theories and expectations were bitterly disappointed. Sporadic miracles simply weren't enough. The miracles had to be produced on demand, under the intense scrutiny of total sceptics. Anything short of permanent miracles, produced on demand, were not miracles at all. Full of rage and bitterness, the detractors of psychic surgery denounced the healers. To the patients who were healed, however, a single miracle was more than adequate proof.

In the face of intense inquiry into the nature of their work, the healers offered a simple explanation for their phenomenal

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abilities. They told the scientists that they were human instruments of elevated spirits whom they called "Spirit Protectors". Under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, these elevated spirits performed psychic surgery through the healers' hands.

EARLY RECORDS OF FILIPINO SPIRITUAL HEALING

In addition to the obfuscation of the healers' successes, no one seemed to be even remotely interested in researching the history of psychic surgery. Seeing no end in sight to the bitter debates on the pros and cons of the operations, I decided to conduct research on these very questions—questions that had been overlooked by both the advocates and the detractors of psychic surgery.

In my studies, I discovered that the history of psychic surgery stretched back hundreds of years. As I delved deeper into the mystery of Filipino spiritual healing, I uncovered a history of not one, but two types of psychic surgery, each with distinctly separate but related histories. I discovered references to the therapeutic use of sleight of hand in manuscripts dating as far back as the 16th century.

In 1565, a Spanish priest/explorer, Pedro Chirino, described the earliest reference to the therapeutic use of sleight of hand in the Philippines. Chirino wrote: "He [the sorcerer] placed one end of the hollow bamboo upon the affected part, while through the other end he sucked up the air; then, he let fall some pebbles from his mouth, pretending they had been extracted from the affected spot." Chirino continued: "In times of sickness, these men were at their best, because in times of sickness they [the patients] were ready to venerate anyone who could give [them a remedy] or at least promise to obtain a remedy for them."

In 1588, an English explorer named Cavendish wrote: "The priests of these tribes were known as Catalona in the north, and Babailan in the Visayas. They were the sorcerers or medicine men, and rude beyond measure was their art in curing, consisting generally of the imaginary extraction of pebbles, leaves and pieces of cane from the afflicted part."

The second type of psychic surgery, the one that had been extensively documented by parapsychologists both in the Philippines and Brazil, was a more recent development. As my understanding grew, I began to realise that something very unusual had taken place in the Philippines.

"Spirit-directed psychic surgery", as I call it, began with the introduction of Catholicism by Magellan. Rather than being scientific in nature, the real mystery of Filipino spiritual healing lay in their religious practices, based on their unique understanding of what Western Christians call "the Holy Spirit". The history of spirit-directed psychic surgery is the history of the incorporation of the Third Person of the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit, into the heart of the shamanic traditions of the indigenous people of the Philippines.

As I listened closely to the Filipinos, I began to understand that their success in healing was derived from their abilities as mediums of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit Protector was "incorporated", they were transformed into "fourth-dimensional surgeons".

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When they finished their session, they returned to their normal routines and habits. All my research seemed to indicate that the mediumistic culture of the Filipinos had, in some inscrutable manner, predisposed them to discover in Jesus' teachings about the Holy Spirit the means of bringing forth an atavistic resurgence of the miraculous healing work first described in the New Testament.

Westerners were disturbed by the fact that psychic surgeons explained their work in Christian terms. Western scientists viewed their explanation as mythology. Western Christians denounced them as satanic. Bypassing both the dogmatism of science and the human domination of religion that Western civilisation has succumbed to, the paranormal healing abilities of the Filipino healers were derived from a verbal dialogue with the Holy Spirit, established in the 19th century through devout Christian mediums.

What I discovered Filipino Christian Spiritism to be, is nothing less than a fully integrated synthesis of Christianity and the paranormal. To comprehend the gifts of the Holy Spirit as paranormal phenomena mediated by trance, altered states of consciousness

and dissociative behaviour, sheds light on the reason why millions of our brothers and sisters in the non-Western cultures are increasingly redefining both Catholic and Protestant Christianity in charismatic terms. The world-view described in biblical narrative is much closer to the everyday experience of non-Western cultures than it is to our own. The reality of an unseen world that lies parallel to our own is as much a fact of life to Filipinos as the ground beneath their feet. Through the work of Dr George Ritchie and Dr Raymond Moody, the existence of this unseen world has now

been widely documented in the West. That this unseen world is inhabited by supernatural beings that can be communicated with, underpins not only the rationale behind prayer, but it can also be extrapolated to include all forms of mediumistic revelation.

Filipino/Filipina Christian Spiritists claim that they are instructed by elevated spirits who identify themselves as "the Spiritual Messengers of Christ". The Greek term for messenger is *angelos*. To Christian Spiritists, the messenger spirits that communicate with them through their mediums

are the Western equivalent of angels. Within the Christian Spiritist community, I found hard evidence that documents their claims: records of events that took place between 1904 and 1933 in the rural province of Pangasinan in northern Luzon. Without this evidence, the real source of the power to perform genuine, "fourth-dimensional operations" would probably have remained a mystery.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITIST UNION

At the core of the paranormal healing practices of the Filipino healers lies an organisation. This organisation was established according to directives received from the unseen world of the Spirit. I learned about the inner workings of this organisation from three documents which I had translated. This organisation

was first established in 1904 and is named the Union Espiritista Christiana de Filipinas (the Christian Spiritist Union of the Philippines).

The first of the documents I discovered was the textbook of the Union. The President of the Union published it in a limited printing in San Fabian, Pangasinan, in 1909. His name was Juan Alvear, and the textbook's title translates as *A Short Spiritist Doctrine*. The text was very difficult to translate because it was written using a combination of three languages: Ilocano, Spanish, and a local dialect known as Pangasinense. After locating a translator who knew all three languages, the translation still dragged on for over a year.

In the textbook, Alvear wrote: "Here in the Philippines, the forces of Christ in the spirit world made themselves manifest through our mediums as medicine called 'magnetic fluid', which flows from the spirit world through the mediums to introduce Spiritism through healing."

Alvear described the reaction of the Church to this collective spiritual intervention when he wrote: "The pulpit and the learned claim that the appearance of the spirits was the work of the devil who settled in the Philippines."

He then added: "There is an increasing number infused with Spiritism, which is spreading to the provinces, and its result is none other than morality and sanctity and the knowledge of God's Spirit."

Alvear concluded: "So it has become clear that Spiritism is a good tree because its fruit is good. Now, it is apparent that God has manifested in the Third Person of the Holy Spirit, announcing to the world that those who believe will be saved."

These Divine spirits, who gained converts through paranormal healing, ultimately instructed the Christian Spiritists to establish an organisation that would facilitate what they termed "the Coming of the Holy Spirit".

The second of the three documents I discovered was the Constitution of the Union. The Constitution seemed in every way to be a normal document of association, outlining the duties and responsibilities of the members of the Union. It appeared so entirely ordinary that I didn't pay much attention to it. Then, one day, I took a closer look at it and found a chapter entitled "Spiritual Direction of the Association". I opened the booklet and read the following: "The Spiritual Direction shall be the Supreme Authority of the Association. This shall integrate a Court of Spirits of Light, officially known as Spirit Protectors, who shall be under the superior and unique direction of Our Lord Jesus. These Spirits are the ones who shall direct the works in general of the Association, principally scientific, philosophical, moral and spiritual, through [mediumistic] communications."

I was astounded to discover that this duly registered association, which appeared normal in every respect, was officially directed through mediums by Spirit Protectors from another dimension. I was also amazed to find that this entire spirit-directed organisation was under the "unique direction of Our Lord Jesus".

The third document I discovered had been recovered from the basement of an old Spiritist centre in Pangasinan that was being razed. The book was handwritten in colonial Spanish in a

beautiful, cursive style. The contents of the book were a mystery. When the archivist of the Union entrusted the book to me, he made it clear that he had no idea what information was contained in it. Once again, I began the arduous task of locating a translator. I soon discovered that this old book, brown and crumbling with age, was the only existing copy of the Minutes of the Union between the years 1919 and 1933.

As the translator worked, I learned firsthand of the precise nature of the trials and tribulations that the great-grandparents of today's psychic surgeons endured in laying the foundation for "the Coming of the Holy Spirit". As the Christian Spiritists proceeded to establish their organisation, they encountered intense opposition from both the Church and the Philippine Medical Association. Whatever challenges they faced, however, were overcome by the advice they received from the Spirit Protectors.

In 1966, the fourth-dimensional healer Eleuterio Terte led a schism from the Union Espiritista and founded the Christian Spiritists of the Philippines. With the arrival of reporters Ron

Ormond and Ormond McGill, Terte brought the mission of "the forces of Christ in the Spirit world" out of the rural Philippines and into the world at large.

THE THIRD DISPENSATION

With the growing scientific evidence for the existence of life after death and the scientific proof of the efficacy of prayer, the reality of the unseen world is gaining credence.

As Western culture grapples with the existence of this parallel dimension that exists in contradiction to the very premise of scientific material-

ism, the Filipinos have moved into a new and highly advanced Spiritual Dispensation. They believe that this Third Dispensation, in which the Holy Spirit will bring about the perfect spiritualisation of humanity, is the core of the prophecies of Jesus Christ. Having seen the evidence, I believe them.

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Harvey Martin is a freelance researcher/writer who has spent many years investigating psychic surgery phenomena. He has just returned from Brazil where he visited the clinic of miracle healer João de Deus (John of God) (see NEXUS 5/02). His book, *The Secret Teachings of the Espiritistas* (ISBN 0-9660843-8-1, 278pp, USD\$24.95), is available from Metamind Publications, <www.metamind.net>.